

I suspect you all know this, but just so things are absolutely clear, John of the Gospel of John and John the Baptist are not the same John. John the Baptist is the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. His birth was foretold to his father by the Angel Gabriel as one who would *make ready a people prepared for the Lord*. John the Gospel writer was one of the 12 disciples of Jesus. Some believe he is also the author of the 3 Letters of John and of the Book of Revelation.

Our gospel readings last week and this evening are from the early chapters of the Gospel of John, In each reading John the Baptist plays an important part. Last week John the Baptist sees Jesus approaching and says: *Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*. He goes on to say of Jesus *I saw the Spirit descending from Heaven like a dove, and it remained on him* thus confirming that Jesus is Son of God, the Anointed One. This evening's passage from Chapter 3 of John is the last time John the Baptist is mentioned in John's Gospel.

In our reading, in response to his disciples telling him that Jesus is also baptizing, John the Baptist says, *He must increase, but I must decrease* – a renowned statement of selflessness. Contrast John's selfless attitude with that of Herod Antipas who is so full of ego that he cannot countenance one more powerful than he. Any one who shows the slightest sign of challenging his position must be arrested and eliminated. Our passage from John's Gospel this evening simply says in verse 24: *John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison*. That is all John has to say about the end of John the Baptist. We rely on Matthew and Mark for greater detail about John's arrest and Herod's dilemma fearing that John may be a threat, but intrigued by his preaching. In the end, having rashly promised anything she wishes up to half his kingdom to his step-daughter, who is also his niece, he cannot bring himself to back track when she asks for John's head on a platter. John loses his head, because Herod couldn't possibly lose face.

The last word we hear in the Gospel of John from John the Baptist is: *The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life but must endure God's wrath*. Everything that the Baptist says in the last 5 verses of our reading tonight is in fact a paraphrase of that which Jesus told Nicodemus 11 verses before our passage begins: *"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*

The last five verses of our reading and Jesus statement to Nicodemus again raises the issue of what is it to say that Jesus takes away the sin of the world? As I mentioned last week, sin is not a catalogue of unfortunate actions or inactions; it is a state of alienation from God, and as a consequence, alienation from neighbour. Jesus gives us a route out of alienation if we but follow his example. *Those who believe in him are not condemned* – those of you who were at this service two weeks ago may remember that I spoke of the problem with the use of the term in English “believe” as a translation of the original work in Greek, *pisteuō*. The Greek word means so much more than the English word believe. *Pisteuō*, as I said two weeks ago, means trust and reliance; it is beyond cognition, more than intellectual agreement; it is deep, moral, and consumingly personal. Above all it is not passive, it demands conviction and an active response. The conviction driven active response is to be an active follower of Jesus in the world. The more successful we are in following the Way, the more our alienation will be mitigated and our sin taken away.

In reading the Gospel of John appointed for this evening and in preparing this homily, the sentence I kept coming back to was John the Baptist’s, *He must increase, but I must decrease*. Now I know I am not the oldest person here, but I will be 73 on my next birthday, so I am certainly not young or even middle-aged. One of things that occurred to me as we entered 2026 is that we are in the second quarter of the 21st century, and I realized that it is almost assuredly my last quarter in this life; indeed, I am not likely to be around for the whole quarter. It is entirely likely that I will be gone well before 2050. In a curious way I find the reality of my limited mortality energizing. I better get on with *pisteuō* while I still have the chance. I have decided to take John the Baptist as a role model. Worry not! I shan’t suddenly appear clad in camel hair, nor shall I dine on wild honey and locusts, but as I decrease, I am going to try with everything I do to increase those who will be here when I am no longer. I think this commitment will take several forms: get out of the way, when younger people can do it better, do everything in support of those who will outlive me including things that I can only do because I have been around so long. Glibly put, move over to be guide on the side rather than the one out front. Perhaps most importantly, offer insight but recognize that the decision on what to do will less and less be mine and more and more will belong to those who will carry on after I am gone. I am better prepared for this switch than many of my contemporaries. I once led a school within a college with more than 200 people reporting to me or reporting through to me. After I left that work, I became a global advisor for a high performance computing company and later an independent consultant with no one reporting to me in either case. Some years ago I said, *I used to have power now I only have influence – influence is better*. So as my dotage proceeds I hope to exercise influence in a way that allows others to increase even as I decrease. I dearly hope not to end with my head on a tray as a prop for a dance routine, but in other respects, John the Baptist is a very good role model. I pray that I may have his grace in accepting that he is there to prepare for someone greater than he and his acceptance that he who is to come will wax as he wanes. I encourage us all of us to consider what does the story of John the Baptist mean to us, to our *pisteuō*, and to our relationship with the Christ. Amen